



SOLEMNE INVESTIDURA COMO DOCTOR HONORIS CAUSA DE BLAKE S. WILSON

LAUDATIO DE ENRIQUE A. LÓPEZ POVEDA, PADRINO DE BLAKE S. WILSON

Universidad de Salamanca, 11 de mayo de 2015.

Rector of the University of Salamanca, Authorities, Members of the Doctors' Senate, Doctors from other Universities honouring us today with their presence, Members of the University Community, Colleagues and Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is for me a great honour and a privilege to speak before you in this ceremony which will end with the admission of Dr. Bake Shaw Wilson to our Doctors' Senate. This is the culmination of a proposal made jointly by the Institute of Neurosciences of Castile & Leon and the Department of Surgery, backed by the Institute of Biomedical Research of Salamanca and further endorsed by the Junta of the School of Medicine, later approved by the Governors' Board, and finally by the Doctors' Senate of this University.

The person and life's work of Blake S. Wilson are known to many of you. Nevertheless, please allow me to recall some details with images before I continue with this *Laudatio*.

[VIDEO]

I can think of no other way of describing the Merits of Dr. Wilson than asking you to perform an exercise of the imagination.

Imagine how excited you felt (or will feel) on learning about the birth of your son or daughter or the birth of your grandchildren. Imagine, however, that unfortunately that child is born deaf, something that happens in one out of every thousand births. What do you feel?... Probably anxiety. Anxiety when you begin to realize that you will not be able to communicate normally with the child and anxiety when you wonder what his or her

education will be like and whether the child and its parents will be able to live a “normal” life.

Now imagine another scenario. Now it is you who, as the result of a disease or a medical treatment, suddenly loses the gift of hearing , something that unfortunately does happen. From one day to the next you become deaf. Imagine not being able to listen to these words, being unable to attend class or listen to a speech, or participate at meetings or in a debate. Imagine not being able to answer the telephone, listen to music. This would be awful, would it not?

Approximately 80 million people throughout the world find themselves in a similar condition. Fortunately, thanks to the investigations of Dr. Wilson, together with those of other researchers, there is now hope for all of them. In fact, today almost 350,000 of these people can not only hear but can also communicate orally, even by telephone, despite their hearing impairment. Many of them were born deaf but have still managed to enjoy a childhood and a life that have been almost normal. The reason is because they bear one or two cochlear implants.

It is our senses that make us human. Thanks to them, we are able to interact with our surroundings and we shape these. We observe and we act, and we observe the results of our actions. Stephen Pinker even defends the notion that consciousness arises from our sensory interaction with the environment. All of our senses are important; the loss or degeneration of any of them accelerate ageing, isolating us from the world, from those around us, from the pleasures that keep us “alive”. Despite this, Helen Keller, a well-known American politician and activist who was blind and deaf, said that if she were able to retrieve one of the senses missing she would prefer that it be hearing because, in her own words, “blindness cuts us off from things, but deafness cuts us off from people”

Thanks to the advent of cochlear implants, today Helen Keller might have been able to recover her hearing. For every one of the 350,000 people who have been fitted with a cochlear implant, the contributions of Dr. Wilson have meant a better quality of life. For humankind at large, the full integration of these people into society is a milestone of unimaginable implications.

Let us not fool ourselves. The efforts of Dr. Wilson and of those who have striven to see the success of the implementation of cochlear implants have been huge. There were many in the 80's who believe that cochlear implants were destined to failure; that it would never be possible to restore speech to a deaf person; that cochlear implants could at best offer their users a few "deformed" sounds. As often happens in large companies, fortunately those people were completely wrong. Nevertheless, the path has been arduous. It has demanded a combination of vision, talent, intellect and determination, reserved only for a few such as Dr. Wilson, for cochlear implants to become a successful reality.

Baltasar Gracián, in the first of his 300 aphorisms, tells us (paraphrased) "Everything is at its acme, but the greatest of perfections is to be a true person". I disagree with the first part of Gracián's statement; cochlear implants are still not perfect but they are what they are thanks to people like Dr. Wilson. People who have known that the huge advances in medicine and science demand that attention be paid to details and, also, that frontiers must be crossed, combining and integrating specialities, and exploring uncharted territories of uncertain transcendence. These are the people who have focused on solving the problem and addressing its possible solutions from a multidisciplinary perspective; people focused on not publishing the numerous fragments of a whole but the "whole" itself. If one day we see the perfect cochlear implant, it will thanks to the spirit of pioneers such as Dr. Wilson.

Returning now to the words of Gracián, the Jesuit was indeed right in that "the greatest of perfections is to be a true person". In this, Dr. Wilson is outstanding. As well as being an exemplary scientist he is also a paragon of generosity. He has shared freely and disinterestedly the results of his research, thereby benefiting not only deaf people but also companies and institutions that have been able to start up thanks in part to his discoveries.

Dr. Wilson has also contributed heavily to this University. For more than a decade he has given his support to our research, training our scientists and offering us his laboratory to begin projects until they are transferred to our own context. He has energetically

supported the setting-up and development of our Diploma in Specialization in Audiology, which is the first and only one of its kind in our country. Finally, he has participated as an active contributor to several of the International Workshops on Advances in Audiology. It is unquestionable, then, that his prestige and acumen have contributed to the proven success of all these activities and to enhancing the domestic and international renown that our University already has in the context of audiology.

In the video we saw that our new Doctor, Dr. Blake Wilson, has received much acclaim and numerous awards. Dr. Wilson is one of the “giants” referred to by Newton. Today we can congratulate ourselves for embracing Dr. Wilson in our Doctors’ Senate, an event that for me personally and the area involved, the Department and the Institute I represent is a motive to feel immense pride and great joy. Our University is replete with history and tradition, with a hunger for internationalization and modernity. The admission of Dr. Wilson to the illustrious Doctors’ Senate of the University of Salamanca is a clear sign of that vocation and is an honour for all of us.

Thank you for your attention.